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ABSTRACT

The Des Moines family learning project, begun in 1972, involves parents, young adults, and children in a program which shows parents effective methods of helping their children learn to read and which helps them discover solutions to many of the conflicts that occur in family situations. This booklet describes the program and explains the various facets of the family learning center. Included are the addresses of the five family-learning centers operated by the Des Moines public schools and located in Des Moines. (JM)

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The Des Moines Family Learning Project

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The Des Moines Family Learning Project began in 1972 as a demonstration program in Family Education. Now operated by the Des Moines Public Schools, it continues to involve mothers and fathers, young adults and children in a process unique to both parent and elementary education. For the Parent Educator, the Family Learning Project can supply answers to the questions of recruitment and curriculum; for the Elementary Educator, it offers an effective means of involving, almost daily, parents in the education of their own children.

In 1971, a mini-project was begun by the Des Moines Schools (DMPS) and the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC)—an outcome of the independent and then joint thinking of the Adult Education staffs of both institutions. This mini-project, 10 weeks in length, proved the benefits of parents and children working together, and the concept was then more fully expanded by a composite committee of Adult Education Directors and staff of the DMPS and the DMACC, with the assistance of the Planning and Programming directors of both these institutions and the Des Moines Model Cities Planning Unit.

In its present scope, the program shows parents effective methods of helping their children learn to read and helps them discover solutions to many of the conflicts that occur in family situations. These central activities—human relations workshops and reading sessions for parents and children —form the nucleus around which can grow an educational program for all members of the community. In addition to pursuing a course in adult thinking skills or working toward a High School Equivalency Diploma, many parents are attending consumer homemaking seminars, toy safety sessions, and other "courses" supplied by resources external to the project. In dealing, fundamentally, with people and their needs, the Family Learning Project has the capacity to serve as a total "Center" for adults and children. In supporting its development, much is owed to Ken Russell, Chief, Adult Education Section, Iowa Department of Public Instruction and the late Dr. Harry Hilton, Senior Program Officer, Region VII, Adult Education Programs.

A Fami'v Learning Center is:

- Fathers and motors gathering together in a workshop to talk about questions such as, "What To Do When They Misbehave?" and "What To Do When Communications Break Down?"
- A concerned mother asking, "My son throws tantrums. . . . How can I stop him?" and another parent quickly echoing, "Yes, our child did the same thing, until we ignored it."
- Parents studying worksheet diagrams and charts, writing their responses to typical family conflicts, and planning their own blueprint for change.

A Family Learning Center is:

- Planning time for parents: A mother choosing reading lessons "right" for her child's needs; briefing herself with examples from the teacher's guide; asking "Should we play a digraph game today?"
- A seven-year-old girl learning phonics after school. (Her mother is her teacher.)
- Teachers teaching parents; parents teaching children.

A Family Learning Center offers:

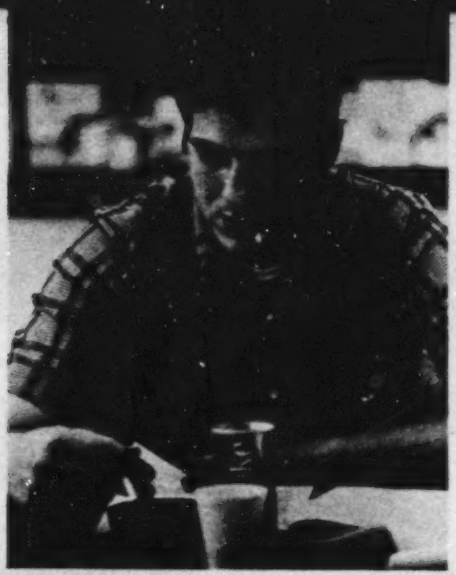
- Parents a "place of their own" within the structure of the elementary school.
- Immediate solutions to family problems through referral to service agencies.
- Programs and a process responsive to community needs.

A Family Learning Center is:

- A 40-year-old woman working on her High School Equivalency diploma . . . among "at home" surroundings in a converted elementary classroom.
- A young mother dropping her first grade boy at school . . . and going down the hall to continue her course in metric math.
- Fun, togetherness, non-structure within structure.

At the five Des Moines centers, activities break roughly into two categories. The family area involves workshops during which participants talk over such concerns as developing self-esteem, how to deal with misbehavior, communication, family conflicts. Following this discussion, or at other times during the week, parents prepare a reading lesson to teach their children. Then the children come in and work together with their parents on the "lesson" that has been prepared.

The community area generally centers around adults only. They may be working on G.E.D. (high school equivalency), learning or brushing up on basic skills, studying business English or math, or participating in a book club. Much of their work is done on an independent basis.



The "classrooms" are inviting, welcoming. They are Living Rooms. A poster on one wall indicates the feeling:

I AM SO GLAD
that you are here
it helps me to realize
how
beautiful
my
world is.
—M. Rilke

There are comfortable couches, chairs, bright yellow tables, orange pillows, live plants, carpeting, books to be checked out, coffee pots perking in the corners, ash trays, posters and mobiles.

People come, often with some trepidation at first, but they do come. Some are there against great odds. "My husband says this is stupid, coming to school like this," Margaret, the mother of three pre-schoolers, said as she finished working on her placement test. "He thinks it's stupid to want to read and do the things that I want to do. And my neighbor says why don't I at least wait 'til the kids are in school, and then I'll know what the problems are. But why wait? By then it might be too late to help my kids."

And once they've come, they are often reluctant to leave. Alberta, who says, "Here I really feel free," would like to come for several workshops each week, even though they would be repetitious. "They would be different," she insists, "because people are different. I like to hear different points of view."

On the wall behind her is a poster bearing Walt Whitman's words:

I celebrate
myself
and sing
myself!

"One thing I really emphasize to participants," a teacher-specialist says, "is that everyone has much to offer, whether or not they have had formal educations. All have wisdom that can't be denied, wisdom which comes from life experiences. They have learned from living. They can continue to learn here." And that, perhaps more than anything else, is what the centers are all about.

The workshop units on developing creativity, language, and reading are particularly designed to inculate an excitement for learning, but for pure popularity, it's hard to beat the workshop on "What to Do When They Misbehave?" Everyone has a problem, and everyone wants to talk about it.

Virginia's son was constantly being beaten up by bullies. "Finally I had to tell him to fight back, but to wait 'til he was off the playground, so he wouldn't get caught. And it worked."

"You actually told him to fight?" asked one in alarm.

"My father always told us if we had to fight with our fists, we didn't have much in our heads," added another.

"Well, maybe it's okay, but only as a last resort," one with a more practical outlook conceded.

"My biggest problem now," Virginia continued, "is that my son thinks he can whip anybody just because he whipped a few kids. Now, I gotta teach him different."

"You won't have to teach him that, honey. Some kid will teach him for you." And with a round of laughter the discussion moves on to another problem.

Do the workshops really help? Sharon thinks so. "One of my kids broke a ceramic vase I had made. I think last week's session really helped me because I managed to stay pretty cool. I told them the house belongs to all of us, and if they want it pretty they are going to have to take better care of things. It worked a lot better than yelling and spanking." And the rest of the group recalled the questions they were to ask themselves regarding the workshop: "Why are they misbehaving—what goals are they seeking? Is it attention? Power? Revenge? What response do I make? How do I change my response to change their behavior?"

One of the specialists puts it this way: "They really do seem to enjoy this. Parents say this program has helped improve relationships. And they do come back from last year."

Carolyn is one who came back. "It's a good program," she says. "I worked as a volunteer last year, and I was impressed. This year, I decided it was time to help my own child."

Donna wanted to know why she couldn't work with someone else's child. "I get so mad at my son when I try to help him read. A word he knows in the first line he suddenly doesn't know in the fourth line."

But another staff member quickly points out, "You must work with your own child because it's important to him to know his parents are interested in him."

The 30-week series of workshops is packed with information—and sharing. The hour-and-a-half discussion, all too soon over, is often followed by a period in which parents prepare a "lesson" to teach their children. The program offers a curriculum of over 400 elementary reading objectives, ranging from readiness to eighth grade, and each objective tells the parent the correct material to prepare. Everything is clearly marked so each parent can pick out the lesson for his child.

Sometimes, the lessons include making reading games for parents to play with their children. Barbara, who had brought tears of laughter to the eyes of her colleagues with her drawing of a dog, muttered, "My poor little girl won't stand a chance with this."

But the Family Learning Specialist tells her, "Your art work doesn't matter. Linda will know that's a dog. If she doesn't, you can tell her. The important thing is that Linda will know you cared enough to make the game to help her learn how to read."

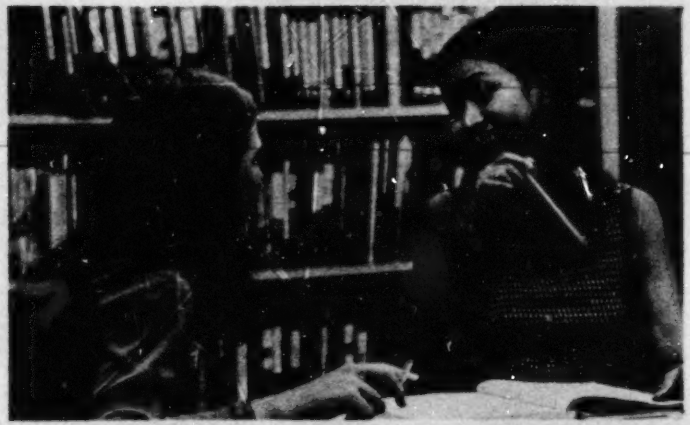
And while the mothers cut and draw and color, they are warned not to make the games too difficult. "You want your child to succeed as well as be challenged."

But whether they succeed or fail at a particular project, the children are enthusiastic. Doris, who had been somewhat less than optimistic about playing the *Sentence Cube Game* with her son, was overheard later saying, "Okay, Kenny, one more game. But then we **must** go."

And go they must, some to collect their preschoolers from the volunteer babysitter and all to return to the home chores they have so pleasantly escaped for a while. But they leave slowly, reluctantly, pausing to chat with each other and with the teachers they have come to know and like so well.

And so they go—relaxed, happy, and now more fulfilled—with a new sense of pride in "What I can do to help my child."

They leave the centers, but they come back



Parents return other times during the week—"without the kids." This is **their** special time. Some pick up skills too hastily cut off when they were young; some pursue newly-renewed goals, knowing the dreams are no longer impossible; all find the centers quickly responsive to their needs.

"I'm going to be a dietitian's helper," says Mary. "I'm going to brush up on things I need, then go on into that training. It's a dream I've always had. And I **am** going to reach it!"

"I got my driver's permit this summer," Linda exuberantly announces as she returns for the new year's session. "The next thing is getting my driver's license." (The center specialist remembers the first thing this pretty, thirtyish woman said eight months before—"I cannot read.")

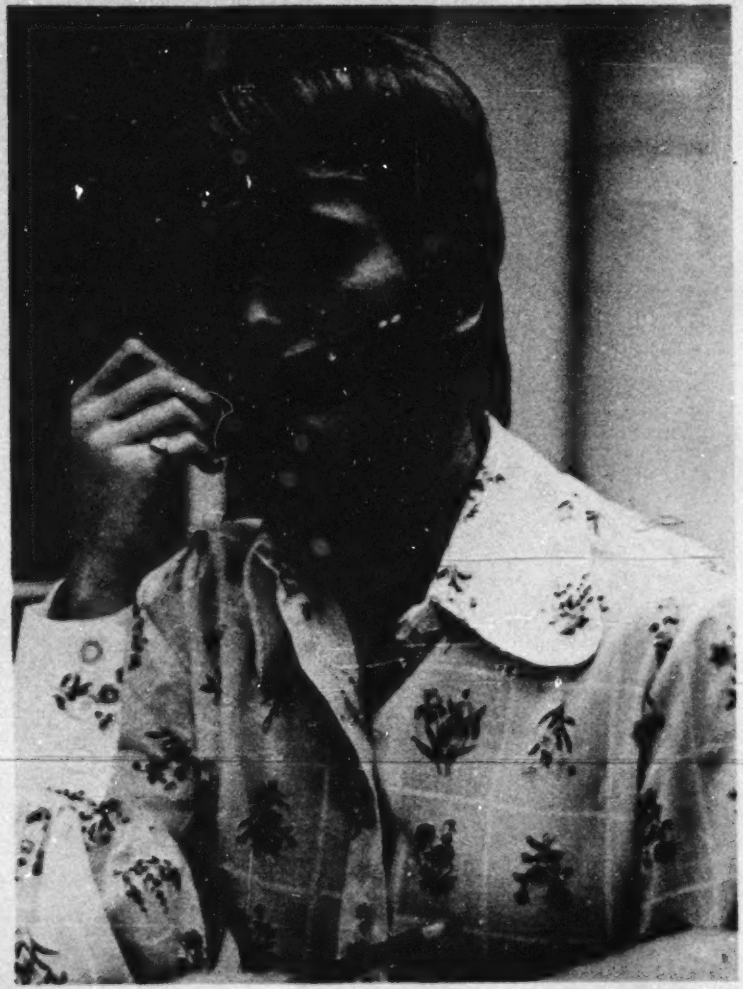
An attractive young grandmother, who finished a daytime course in business English, returns again at night several times a week to work on her G.E.D. She confides: "I'm the only one in my family without a high school diploma. And when I get my G.E.D., the first thing I'm going to do is mail it to my mother!"

One young mother murmurs quietly, folding up a worksheet, "I'm going to take this home to study my spelling."

The worksheet is one of a series of 123 which are pursued in the center with cassette tape instruction. This is part of an exciting, three-level program in adult language skills, logic, and comprehension. At a Family Learning Center, it's not unusual to find an adult studying long vowels with the aid of a folksong, "Fireball," or pursuing the use of the silent 'e' in a unit dramatizing a young man's loss of a friend to drugs.

"I know we should do the tapes before we do the workbook—but I have to really hold myself back to keep from going ahead in my workbook at home," says a smiling-faced woman.

"Here at the center when I am working on this, I can get away from and completely forget my problems. I can just leave them at home," says one.



"This was like exercising muscles in my mind I hadn't used for years—just like exercising other not-used muscles," says another.

But for others, difficulties sometimes abound. It's hard to go "back to school," even in such a relaxed atmosphere.

"I don't know nothin'," one woman moaned as she tugged her hair in frustration while taking her placement test. "I don't know why I'm here."

But she's here all right, with a sense of determination, a living illustration of G. B. Shaw's words:

> You see things as they are;
> and you ask "Why?".
> But I dream things that never
> were: and I ask "Why not?"

Men have been slower to join the rush to the family learning centers, but some are showing up, both for the workshops and for other educational programs. And there's good reason to believe that more will be coming as the suspicion hits them that their wives are having a good time learning.

Though education and economic backgrounds of family learning center members vary, all are there to learn something—whether it's basic phonics or how to cope with their children.

In addition to language and logic, High School Equivalency, and the workshops and reading sessions that are central to the project, there are other "courses," many specifically requested by participants themselves. Some of the parents (and other adults in the community) are busy taking tips from a program on Preparing Your Income Tax; others dig into Metric Math. Many women find that Sewing Tricks help them save time without cutting "corners." One center offered a series on consumer/community affairs, and the house was packed the night that a panel of city and state officials met to field questions from constituents. In these and other efforts to meet community needs, the centers rely on the abilities of Home Economists ("attached" to each center one half day each week) and other resources supplied by the local Community Education Department.

Other needs—housing, legal assistance, health care—demand more specialized attention, and for these, each center maintains working referral liaisons with over two dozen service agencies in the city.

Rosemary, a 42-year-old mother with seven children still at home, is one who took advantage of such additional help. She got her G.E.D. at the Family Learning Center, and completed training full time for a business occupation at a local MDTA facility, and still talks of her appreciation for the Family Learning Center. . . . "I had been away from school so long . . . I was scared. But I was determined, and with the effort and the encouragement I received at the Family Learning Center, I started my training. I've been working for a year now, since I finished training, and I've never been happier with myself."

The children's reactions also reflect the success of the program. And occasionally they are moved to express their thoughts on paper.

Toni writes

I AM HAPPY WHEN—

"My mom comes to the family learning center."

And Janine pays the ultimate of all tributes when she writes

ONE DAY I'D LIKE TO BE

"A teacher for the family learning center."

In their direct way, the children are a mirror of what their parents feel. Adults and children know that in discovering learning, they are merely discovering themselves.

THERE ARE FAMILY LEARNING CENTERS AT

Brooks School
2124 Des Moines St.

Edmunds School
1601 Crocker

King School
1849 Forest

Howe School
3030 Indianola Rd.

McKinley School
1610 SE 6th

OPERATED BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AND ADULT EDUCATION
DES MOINES PUBLIC SCHOOLS
1800 GRAND
DES MOINES, IOWA 50307

Dr. Gareld Jackson, Director
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Des Moines Public Schools

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Persons interested in initiating a Family Learning Project can write to the above address for further information.

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